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The Power of Literature Circles in the Classroom

By [Elena Aguilar](#)
11/30/10

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My six-year-old son has finally, really started reading. It's thrilling to watch him grab book after book off his overflowing shelves and read stories he's been hearing for years. Now he wants to take books to school so that during recess, he can entice his friends to sit together and read. He says it will be called the "Reading Club."

"I was in a book club once," I said, explaining how a group of friends read the same novel and then discussed it over dinner. My son loved the idea and immediately started brainstorming who he'd invite, when they'd meet, what they'd read, and what they'd eat.

But the rabbit hole of nostalgia that I tumbled into was of my experience as a teacher facilitating literature circles. I get kind of giddy and dreamy-eyed when I remember what it felt like to circulate through a class of seventh graders meeting in lit circles, when I remember their arguments about a character's actions, or the post-its covered in notes that stuck out of the pages, or the pleas for a few more minutes when I'd say we were out of time. During literature circle meetings my classroom vibrated with learning, passion, and joy.

Why Literature Circles?

I promise to provide practical resources on the how, when, where, what of lit circles, but let me first make a case for why every K-12 classroom should institute some version of literature circles.

Reason #1: Literature circles can be a place for cooperative learning. Students help each other understand a text and make sense of it. Lit circles teach kids how to use each other as resources and become independent learners. Of course, in order for them to be an effective structure for cooperative learning, the teacher needs to intentionally develop them as such. Without guidance, modeling and support, they aren't automatically places of collaboration.

Reason #2: Literature circles allow students to make choices about their learning. Students are usually given the opportunity to select one of several books that they'd like to read. They can also have a say about who to be with in a book group. All children desperately need more opportunities to make choices in school. Choice leads to deeper engagement, increased intrinsic motivation, and an opportunity for guided-decision making.

Reason #3: Literature circles are fun, in part because they are social experiences. Students are *expected* to talk a lot, (in contrast to the rest of their time at school) to debate and argue their ideas. Students are invited to bring their experiences and feelings into the classroom and to share them. Reading *has to be fun* some of the time; if we don't make the experience enjoyable, our students are not likely to continue it once they're released from

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Third-grade teacher, writer, and researcher

**Betty Ray**

our grip.

Furthermore, when we experience joy or pleasure, we feel more connected to a place, and to the people in that place. It was an imperative that my middle school students felt connected to school and had positive academic interactions with their classmates. As in many urban districts, the drop out rate in Oakland, California is terribly high; research reveals that students drop out primarily because they don't feel connected to a place or its people.

Therefore I'll argue that a structure like literature circles, when functioning as a place of connection and fun, can serve to anchor our kids in school. Our students will not master standards and perform on exams if we cannot keep them in our classrooms; lit circles can help do that.

Reason #4: Finally, because they are fun, because students have choice, and because they are a cooperative learning structure, literature circles are powerful experiences for reluctant and/or struggling readers. Literature circles have to be differentiated; by nature each group will read books at different levels on different topics. Struggling readers can select a text at their level; the teacher can provide direct support to that group or can include a couple of higher-readers.

One important note (now moving into the details): students should be offered many genres -- "literature circles" does not imply only fiction. My struggling readers (often boys) wanted mostly non-fiction. (A fascinating book on this topic is [Reading Don't Fix No Chevys: Literacy in the Lives of Young Men.](#))

Resources for the "Who, What, When, and Where"

Of course, in order for lit circles to be fun places where students learn cooperatively, there's a lot that a teacher needs to do. Fortunately, there are many resources for creating high-functioning literature circles. To start with, try checking out these resources:

- Some years ago, I created a [Web site about literature circles](#). It's not a comprehensive guide, but provides some ideas about how to get started.
- My favorite book is the classic, [Literature Circles](#), by Harvey Daniels.

Readers: I'd love to hear about your experiences with literature circles. Why and how have you established them in your class? What happened? What were some challenges? There's so much more to say on this topic (perhaps in a future blog post!)

In the meantime, I'm off to cook up some green soup for my son's first book club meeting. They're starting with a classic: *Green Eggs and Ham*. My son plans to debate the ethics of eating animals. I can't wait to hide in the hallway and listen.

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Tanja Medrano

Teacher

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Posted on 12/08/2010 8:20pm

I love the idea and

I also love your enthusiasm for lit circles! I also love the idea and implementation of lit circles. I was able to use them very successfully with a small group of eighth graders last year that were behind and struggling with reading skills. I began the first one by giving the students a mini book report on several books and had the students vote on which one they wanted to read the most. Then we formed a circle and I set out some guidelines. The students needed to work on reading

out loud so I said each student was to read a minimum of two lines and a maximum of one page during each turn. The students were very nervous at first since they were all poor readers. It was great to see this change as the book went on. At first all the students were reading the minimum but pretty soon all of them were reading half a page to a full page before passing to the next student. I smiled inside everytime a student would choose to read more than they had before.

In addition to reading, we worked on several other skills. At the begining of each class I would ask them to recall what happened the day before in the reading. This was to help them with recall but I used it under the guise of filling in students who may have been gone. At the end of the reading, we would discuss what had happened and make predictions for the next day.

Through this simple and informal group setting, these students blossomed so much throughout the year. It is a true testament to how effect lit circles can be. It has made me a believer for sure! I will use them in all my classes in the future.

4. [Big Thinkers: Howard Gardner on Intelligences](#)
5. [An Introduction to Project-Based](#)



Alaina B

Sixth grade reading teacher from Baltimore, Maryland

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Posted on 12/08/2010 6:58pm

Thank you so much for all of the information. I have actually really been wanting to incorporate literature circles in my classes for awhile now, but don't feel a 100% confident in doing so. No one in my building has much experience with them either and there is so much out there that it is hard to know what is best to read. I will definitley check out your website and books and share them with my colleagues!



Laura Cruz

Third Grade Teacher and Walden Graduate Student

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Posted on 12/08/2010 6:49pm

literature circles

I had my students meeting for awhile, giving them time to discuss a book I had assigned the whole group. It was not very formal. My principal was not impressed and was concerned that I was unable to really work with small groups to focus on the standards. I want to find a way to continue encouraging them to read, in this "book club" type setting. In this way they can share their understanding and enthusiasm for the books as they share as a part of a reading community. Thanks for your post. It has reignited my thoughts on this strategy!



Amanda Sommerkamp

2nd Grade Teacher, Cincinnati Ohio

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Posted on 12/08/2010 6:41pm

Literature Circles Inspire Young Readers

Thank you for sharing your son's experience with Literature Circles. I think it is truly wonderful that his love of reading stems from the fact that he is interested in literature circles. I teach 2nd graders and we begin literature circles in November. Up until that point I meet with small groups of students in guided reading groups. In those guided reading groups the students are taught to "think" about books by questioning, predicting, connecting, etc. I try and teach them how to be active thinkers. Then, once they are familiar with really thinking through books, we begin what I call "Book Club". A book club is essentially the same thing as a literature circle. I start out by assigning each student a "job" for the section of the book we are reading. The students discuss which book they want to read, how much they want to read for that particular assignment, and then they are each responsible for completing a task and they will bring that task back to the group to discuss their learning with their peers. As the year goes on we begin to move away from each student having an assigned "task" and instead allow the students to become deep thinkers as they are reading. I tell students that any time they read something and it provokes a thought they should write that thought on a post-it note and stick it on the page they had that thought. It can be

a question, prediction, inference, connection, or anything else they want to write about. Then we share out our thoughts and ideas at the next Book Club meeting. What I have found is that the students LOVE being able to write down their thoughts instead of being told what they have to do. The conversations the students have during Book Club meetings are authentic and really address what the students want to learn about and what they need to learn to understand the story. I often have the students ask to read lengthy portions of the book for their assignment because they are so excited to read and find out what happens in the book. Allowing the groups to select the books they are going to read makes them even more eager to read and work hard. I think that as teachers our most important task is getting students excited about reading. I feel like we do that through literature circles/book clubs really well!

**JRice**

Special Education teacher from New Jersey

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Posted on 12/08/2010 3:39pm

Great Information!

In my school district there is a focus on guided reading. I like to use literature circles as a break from guided reading. I find that it provides students with more opportunities to enjoy, and express their feelings about what they are reading. Having used literature circles with my class in the past, I find that I have to make more of the choices about the books for students especially regarding the levels. When I have a student who needs to be challenged, I find that one of the best things is another student who works at their same level. When I have students who are struggling readers, they benefit from having the teacher sit with them to further their discussions. I am currently teaching special education in a resource room pull out setting. I only have two students and am not sure how much of a discussion they would have. I hope to be able to use literature circles with them this year, as I know how much students enjoy them!

**Michele T.**

3rd grade teacher from North Carolina

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Posted on 12/08/2010 3:40pm

Excited about getting started!

After reading your blog, I am now excited about getting started with implementing literature circles in my classroom. I was hesitant and not sure if I wanted to do this with my students this year. I have low performing students who just do not seem to be motivated to read. I feel that with literature circles, I may be able to help to motivate them to want to read more and instill in them a love for reading. Thanks!

**Sara Gossett**

Teacher

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Posted on 12/07/2010 8:02pm

I really enjoyed your post!

I find it so refreshing that your son is so excited about reading. Green eggs and ham is a favorite of mine. I enjoyed your information about literacy circles in the classroom. I like how this idea can be used in all grade levels and incorporated in any level of reading. I am curious as to what books your students found most interesting to read? I am an elementary teacher but would be curious to know what middle schoolers are reading these days. I look forward to reading more of the resources you provided and incorporating literacy circles into my classroom curriculum.



**Kim Hayle**

Third Grade teacher from Hermitage, TN

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Posted on 12/07/2010 7:10pm

Thank you for the motivation!

This year I have a great class to begin this with. I have encouraged them to read and earn Accelerated Reader points but I have been wondering how I can get them excited enough about reading that they will discuss books and tell others about them. Thank you for the ideas. I will research your site and get started in January. I can't wait!

**Mary**

Second grade teacher from Greensboro, NC

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Posted on 12/07/2010 11:37am

Lower level and non readers

Thanks so much for your insight! This was a wonderful post. I was wondering if anyone could suggest ideas on how to implement literature circles into a classroom of lower level readers? I am a second grade teacher, and I have around 6 students who are reading on a kindergarten level. Please help???

Thanks,
Mary

**Rebecca Alber**

Edutopia consulting online editor

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Posted on 12/06/2010 1:00pm

Getting started

In my classroom experiences with Lit Circles, as a teacher and as a instructor and coach of teachers, one bit of advice: Don't give up. It's often rough-going in the beginning.

Some of the things that make it awkward and a bit clanky at first?

- Students are not used to such freedom (and having the learning 100 percent in their hands!)
- Teachers are not so accustomed to this extreme of "guide on the side" facilitator
- Becoming familiar with the different roles (i.e. Discussion Director, Summarizer, Quote Finder, etc.) takes time and practice

I've seen teachers give up too early, and I can recall feeling like throwing in the towel myself. Just like Socratic Seminars, though, students need to be given plenty of time, space and guidance so they familiarize themselves and become comfortable with this type of learning (active vs. passive).

Good luck!

Rebecca Alber
Edutopia

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